

Victor Frankenstein as a Tragic Hero

by Marjorie Schulenburg

Victor Frankenstein is unquestionably the protagonist of Mary Shelley's novel whose title features his last name, *Frankenstein*. Yet whether or not Victor is truly a tragic hero is open for debate. Some have suggested that the Creature is more convincing as a tragic figure because of the insights about himself and his actions that he expresses to Captain Walton after Victor's death. Nevertheless it is the growth of Victor as a hero that we shall trace in the course of the novel's plot, a story narrated by Captain Walton based on his interview with Victor on board ship as they head toward the North Pole.

A tragic hero by definition (Aristotle's *Poetics*) is supposed to be high born—traditionally a member of the royal family or at least in a position of power or influence. Victor tells Captain Walton that he had an ideal childhood. His father was a syndic (judge) who married the daughter of his best friend, a woman whose unselfishness recommended her along with her beauty (Caroline Beaufort). The family consisted of three sons and an adopted daughter and lived on what appears to be a rural estate or manor house in the environs of Geneva. So far, so good: Victor is born to a family of sensibility and means who nurtured him with love and encouragement, especially in the pursuit of learning.

Aristotle's definition also stipulates that a tragic hero is a person with admirable qualities who yet has one characteristic that, together with fate, can lead to his or her undoing. Victor growing into a young man, appears to have admirable qualities. He loves his family, admires his adopted sister and values his friendship with a neighboring young man, Henry Clerval. Victor also demonstrates his attraction to the biological sciences, what was then called "Natural Philosophy," and gravitated toward the works of scholars considered "alchemists," including Cornelius Agrippa and Albertus Magnus. Does this attraction to a certain type of learning represent a tragic flaw? Victor's father and later his professor at the university, M. Krempe, criticize his attraction to Cornelius Agrippa, claiming that the studies and theories of the alchemist are outmoded. Victor's response is to ignore these warnings and

prefer another teacher who is more tolerant of all scholarly contributions. While Victor's preference for the alchemists cannot be said to be an error or flaw, it does show that he is drawn to studies that go beyond the accepted limits of the discipline as it was understood at the time. His preference for "cutting edge" approaches and theories will influence his project that would pursue the "secret of life" and an attempt actually to bestow life on an inanimate form.

Victor's life changes drastically two years later after he succeeds in creating life in the laboratory. Rather than rejoice in his achievement, an achievement which he does not share with anyone, least of all the family members that he loves, he is repulsed by the ugliness of the form. As the Creature starts to move and at one point comes in to Victor's bed chamber to seek him, Victor flees and is in total denial about what has happened. After becoming delirious and ill, he is nursed by the recently arrived Henry Clerval and plans to return Geneva. Still he tells no one, especially not his best friend and would-be confidante.

We have to ask why Victor persists in this dishonesty by omission, in not telling what he has done. This reticence becomes even more questionable when, after his return to Geneva, he knows the truth about the Creature having murdered his younger brother, William, yet allows an innocent young woman and a friend of Elizabeth, to hang for it.

There is no question of Victor's depth of feeling and even sympathy through the course of these events. He tells us about how depressed, guilty, and even despondent he feels, but still he tells no one. He even contemplates suicide at one point, thinking to drown himself in the lake, but the thought of how this disaster would affect Elizabeth prevents him, so we know he is capable of empathy. Still the reader cannot resist the thought that maybe it is Victor's pride that keeps him from owning up to what he has done. His rationalization is that no one would believe him if he did tell.

When the Creature encounters Victor near Mont Blanc and enjoins him to listen to his side of the story, Victor does make plans to rectify the situation and possibly alter the course of events for what he tells us is the good of humanity. The Creature is lonely, having been violently rejected by other

humans, and if Victor will only make another of his kind, they will emigrate and live in the jungles of South America, never to be heard from or seen again. Victor agrees to this plan, realizing that even he owes some show of compassion to the sentient being he has created. There's a chance that things could yet work out. Meanwhile, what remains of Victor's family, namely his father, wants him to marry his adopted sister to bring some sense of hope and future happiness for the Frankenstein family.

Victor agrees to this plan also, but only after fulfilling his "duty" to the creature, thereby giving himself a window two years' time.

The plan is for Victor to work on the female counterpart while he is travelling in northern Europe with his friend, Henry Clerval. While Henry goes to Oxford, Victor will secretly, with no one knowing except the Creature, embark on this new project in a cave on the Orkney Islands. The problem is that, before he makes much progress on this second "reanimate," Victor has a moment of recognition: he cannot go through with it.. Yet Victor's moment of truth here must be questioned also. We are told that this time he found the activity of making another creature "detestable"¹¹ and kept wanting to procrastinate. Moreover, he expresses physical repulsion on seeing the Creature looking in on his work:

I trembled and my heart failed within me; when on looking up, I saw by the light of the moon, the daemon at the casement. A ghastly grin wrinkled his lips as he gazed on me, where I sat fulfilling the task which he had allotted me . . . I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged.
(Shelley 115)

Almost an instinctive revulsion to the task, quite in contrast to the alacrity that propelled him forward that first time in his laboratory in Ingolstadt, now moves Victor. He proceeds to rationalize that, for the sake of his fellow man, he cannot assume the risks that creating a mate for the "daemon" would entail. He therefore destroys the female form with his hands and dumps the remains in a nearby lake.

¹¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. J. Paul Hunter, A Norton Critical Edition, New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1996, 113. All subsequent references are to this edition which features the 1818 text.

Lest Victor think he can go on to enjoy his life and impending marriage under these circumstances, the Creature vows revenge and promises, among other things to “be with you on your wedding night” (116). He initiates a killing spree that ends with the death, not of Victor, but of his new bride, Elizabeth. Still Victor tells no one. After the earlier murder of Henry Clerval and the intervention of his father, Victor tells no one. While in jail in Ireland, his ravings about responsibility for Henry’s death are dismissed as the result of his temporary derangement. In making plans to marry Elizabeth, he promises to tell her the day after their wedding, but, of course, that is not allowed to happen.

Throughout the novel, the only person to whom Victor ultimately confides is Captain Walton. With Victor’s entire family now dead (except for Ernest who is never mentioned), Victor pursues the Creature through northern Europe into the Arctic regions with the purpose of killing him. On his death bed, he sums up what he has learned from the experience, and this is indeed where we expect to see his actual “moment of recognition.” Victor wants Captain Walton to complete his unfinished task of killing the Creature, but the closest Victor himself comes to a moment of recognition smacks, instead, of pride and solipsism: in examining his past conduct, he tells Walton, he does not “find it blamable.” He describes his creation of the Creature as “a fit of enthusiastic madness.” Victor now recognizes that his “duties towards my fellow creatures” trump any “claims” the creature might have to his “attention,” and he proclaims confidently, “I refused, and I did right in refusing, to create a companion” for his own creature (151). Victor may have “done right” in this instance, but the reader cannot help but feel that it this “right” behavior stands pretty much alone in the history of Victor’s other actions regarding the creature.

It is also characteristic of “Victor” to ask Captain Walton, as his dying request, to find the Creature and kill it since he will not live to complete the task. This request, when seen in the context of the rest of the plot, takes on an interesting dimension. Throughout the narrative, Victor has attempted to offer his story to Walton as an exemplum of the dangers of pursuing one’s own curiosity to such limits as

could endanger the rest of humanity: When Walton questions Victor about the procedure that enabled him to create life, Victor replies, “Are you mad, my friend . . . whither does your senseless curiosity lead you?” (146) and earlier, “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge . . .”(31). Yet when Walton himself considers turning back from the treacherous journey to explore the North Pole, a consideration encouraged by representatives of the crew, Victor having overheard the men’s request and in spite of his weakened state, springs into action: “What do you mean . . . Are you so easily turned from your design?” he asks. “Oh! be men, or be more than men,” he tells the sailors (149). It seems that he cannot quite espouse what he himself should have learned and still cannot reject—the temptation to strive for fame at all costs.

Victor’s final request to Walton, however, does not represent the unquenchable flame of ambition, but rather and quite simply, revenge. He acknowledges that his earlier plea for Walton to kill the Creature may have been “actuated by selfish and vicious motives,” but that he now asks it “induced by reason and virtue” (151). Really? If he does think his request is reasonable and virtuous, it is only because he never understood the Creature and its milieu in the first place. Fortunately, Walton soon has the chance to gain that insight.

As we know, the Creature comes aboard Walton’s vessel to mourn Victor’s death. He also explains to Walton that all he wanted was Victor’s acknowledgment and attention, even though that attention had to assume a destructive form. The creature acknowledges his crimes, but unlike Victor in his single-minded pursuit of his animation project, the Creature testifies to the conflict he experienced in acting them out: “do you think that I was then dead to agony and remorse . . . he [Victor] suffered not more in the consummation of the deed;—oh! not the ten-thousandth portion of the anguish that was mine during . . . its execution” (153). And when Walton then accuses the Creature of being incapable of pity, the latter eloquently sums up his tragedy: “whilst I destroyed his hopes, I did not satisfy my own. Was there no injustice in this?” (155).

Finally, like the tragic hero that the Creature is, he accepts his fate of both exile and death: "It is true that I am a wretch. I have murdered the lovely and the helpless . . . I have pursued him [Victor] to irremedial ruin." The Creature has his moment of recognition, and it is one such as Victor never quite attains. He tells Walton, "Do not think I shall be slow to perform the sacrifice." Just as Oedipus is lead away to the wilds of Citheron, the Creature will leave on the ice raft, build his own funeral pile, "and consume to ashes this miserable frame , that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch who would create such another as I have been" (155).

Victor, in contrast, dies without ever quite getting it. His body gives out before he can perform his final, intended act of destruction. Moreover, as we have seen, in his death bed speech, he seems to forgive himself and the impetuosity of his youth for the result of his creation. Yet the creature, the botched result of Victor's failed experiment, became a sensitive and sentient being whose innate human goodness, in the paradigm of Rousseau, was thwarted only by the succession of cruelties he experienced in society, and this, because of his physical ugliness.

Most importantly, though, it is the Creature who experiences and sees the tragedy of it all. Victor, may have begun the story with the profile of the tragic hero, but by the end he is still blinded by his own pride and focused on his own misfortune. Bent only on the destruction of the Creature, he never quite gets it. Ironically, it is the Creature, the unfortunate result of Victor's tampering with nature, who, in his final understanding, comes closest to tragic stature. He addresses the deceased Victor with his final words:

. . . if yet, in some mode unknown to me, thou hast not yet ceased to think and feel, thou desirest not my life for my own misery. Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine . . . I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. . . My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell.
(Shelley 156).